

CHAPTER 233

February 17, 2012

"It feels like we've been running forever!"

The investigation team ran along the pedal stained path, eyes trained carefully on the horizon as they searched for any signs of Marie. They were running out of time until this place closed up again, and yet it felt like they weren't getting any closer to extracting Marie from this hell hole. Justin only hoped the sudden straight pathway they had found was a good sign and not just an inappropriately long hallway. He was exhausted, and his ribs were still killing him from the day prior; but he pressed on all the same. Maybe it was just pure adrenaline and determination fueling him at this point. Maybe it was the sweet, but oh so painful sound of guitar strings humming in the air around him. It had been distant when they first came here, but as they progressed further and further, Justin was sure that was Marie and her trusty old fender playing those depressing notes that lingered in the air. He would know. He was the one who taught her the song after all.

Where are you hiding, my love?

Cast off like a stone

Feelings raw and exposed when I'm out of control

Pieces were stolen from me

Or dare I say, given away

Watching the water give in

As I go down the drain

I appear missing now

The closer they got, the more the words seemed to echo through the winds in a haunting melody that chilled Justin to his very soul. There was something very different about hearing someone play a song, and someone play a song with all their pain and suffering and hurt. If the exhaustion wasn't causing Justin to want to keel over, her music certainly was. But he pressed on, determined to cut off the caged bird's song of sorrow.

"We're almost there. I can sense it." Rise assured Justin as they paced forward, breath heavy as their lungs tried to collapse on themselves. It was no doubt late back in the real world, but they were so close Justin could almost taste it. And the flavor? Sour. Sour like bitter tears. He knew that taste all too well, and he had no

intentions of having a second serving. Yet it seemed pain always found its way back to him some way or another. Whether it be his own or another's. I guess that was his role in life; to be a permanent outlet for suffering. And he'd never break free from his place in the world, as much as he tried. Perhaps it was that fear itself that had brought them here to this very moment; the fear of being nothing more than what they were, never able to break free of the shackles of their destinies.

I go missing,

No longer exist

One day I hope

I'm someone you'd met

Shock me awake

Tear me apart

Pinned like a note in a hospital gown

Deeper I sleep

Further down

A rabbit hole never to be found

"Wait... There's someone up ahead." Justin skidded to a stop, holding his hands back to slow everyone down. The figure was wrapped in white robes, sitting on a staircase, eyes downturned, and while it was impossible to tell from a distance who they were based on their features, Justin could make out the all too recognizable shape of a guitar body on her knee. So unless Marie had formed a band amongst the shadows here, that was probably her. Justin carefully crept towards the figure, heart slowing in pace to match the tempo of her strings, as if his old ticker had a set of ears of its own, and eyes with which to silently weep tears of blood. Yet despite the pain inside him keeping his movement to a snail's pace, the slow tapping of his shoes against the fragmented stone path vibrated through the air and reached her ears.

"...Stay back." She ordered, cutting Justin off before he could take a single step more, not so much as raising her eyes to look him in the face. Justin needless to say, was cautious as she barked orders at him, raising his hands in a surrender like motion, making it clear he had nothing up his sleeves. He couldn't quite explain what it was, but there wasn't something quite right about the way she barked at him. Like... she was ordering him around like usual, but there was just something missing. Hope, perhaps. Guidance, perhaps. It was hard to say with any degree of certainty.

"It's okay Marie, it's just us. We're here to bring you home." Justin tried to reassure her, waving his hands a bit as if to try and calm her down. It was silent for a moment, not so much as the slightest sleight of hand throughout the boardwalk leading to Marie. Perhaps that was what had made it so unsettling when Marie finally looked up; it added a rather surreal quality to the horrifying image before them.

"I have no home. You don't get it." She muttered sorrowfully, though it was hard for Justin to truly pay attention to the sadness in her voice when that fucking thing was staring at him. What in god's name had happened to her eye? It wasn't just a completely different color, green instead of brown, but rather, it also seemed to bulge out a bit, and it never seemed to move; almost like a lazy eye. It wouldn't have been so horrifying had they not known what she normally looked like. This? Something had gone horribly wrong, that was for sure. "I can't believe it... Why'd you come? Why?" She demanded an answer with annoyance, having just about enough of Justin and the group.

"Why? Why wouldn't we?" Justin countered, not really answering the question. "I know what it's like to want to shut yourself away from people Marie, believe me I do. For the first twelve or so years of my life the only friend I had was my own reflection for fuck's sake. But you can't lock yourself up like this; especially not HERE." Marie stared at Justin for a moment before averting her gaze, perhaps feeling ashamed, or perhaps unable to bear looking at the man. It was hard to say; all that was clear was she didn't want any of them here.

"You thought I was in danger, didn't you? That I might get killed by shadows."

"Well a little, but I get the strangest feeling you got through the television on your own. And anyone who can do that can defend their self just fine. It was more so the 'no way out' thing that bugged us." Justin shrugged a bit. If she wanted to isolate herself, Justin could understand that. But this was a permanent thing; once she decided to lock herself away in here, this was where she was going to stay. I mean... wouldn't she rather just lock herself in her house or something? Same effect, except she could change her mind somewhere down the road. This? A little extreme. Marie shook her head.

"...It'd be better that way. This is a grave... my grave. I'm going to die here." She spoke, almost feeling reassured by her own conviction to die. Justin simply raised his eye brow with one of those 'run that by me again' looks before turning his attention to the others on the team. They were just as confused, if only because this had all seemed so out of the blue.

"...Riiiiight, so as I was saying, we should you know. Go home." Justin tried to ignore her sudden suicidal tendencies. To be quite honest, he thought she was being a little melodramatic at first, and even if she wasn't, he wasn't exactly sure how to address a mood swing like that head on. In fact, it was a little awkward to

say the least. Marie, needless to say, was infuriated not only by the fact that Justin seemed to keep trying to get her to leave, but also because he didn't understand ANYTHING.

"Shut up! You don't know anything! Emmy, Marie... Neither of those is my name!"

"Is it Maria?" Justin inquired. It might seem like an inopportune time to be making wise cracks, but in actuality, it was the only thing keeping him calm and collected right now. He didn't operate well under a high pressure atmosphere; he lost his temper too easily and let his emotions block his judgement. All these jokes helped him maintain a steady head and think this through rationally. It was only a shame it was pissing Marie off in the process.

"My real name is Kusumi-no-Okami!" She countered angrily, annoyed with Justin's sarcasm. She had to wonder why she even cared what he thought now. Part of the reason he was separating himself from the others was because she didn't need their damn opinions anymore. One, she was more powerful than any of them, she didn't have to listen. Two, well... To some extent she still held these people as her friends. It was her last act of friendship that she was separating herself from them so that she could no longer impact their lives, or vice-versa, keeping the balance. "You guys fought Kunino-sagiri and Ameno-sagiri, right? I'm the same as them. I'm your enemy, one of the ones who covered your town with fog." She confessed with a gentle, but painful smile. Proud of what she was, but not what she had done.

"Wait, what did she just say!?" Chie shouted with exasperation. She wasn't angered or anything like that, she had just never expected to find she had been mingling with the enemy this entire time. Perhaps now she understood what it was like when Justin found out that Adachi was their killer. It was like losing part of the puzzle. Strangely, as much as this was a bit of a shock to everyone, Justin didn't even flinch. He had been betrayed so many times by people he trusted that it just didn't faze him anymore. It had almost become part of a schedule for him. And truth be told, Marie was always kind of a bitch, so it wasn't like it hit him on a deeply personal level. Basically, it sucked, but he didn't see much of a problem.

"Meh."

"Sneaking into the human world... sensing the will of man... My role was to inform the Sagiri what the 'wish of the people' was. That's why I'm the only one of them that looks human. Even without my memory, my body fulfilled my role. In your words, I'm a spy." She confessed. Justin had to wonder what exactly she was gathering from her time in the human world that she had come to the conclusion of total fucking extinction, but it made as much sense as anything else he had seen he supposed. Perhaps he shouldn't have been teaching her certain songs though, since he was guessing that might have been having a slight adverse reaction on the fate of mankind and all.

"You were spying without knowing it...?" Rise questioned almost apologetically. That wasn't really spying so much as it was being a human wiretap; and in the end, she had to suffer the guilt knowing she was nothing more than a means to an end. It wasn't fair to her or anyone.

"Do you understand now? Plus... I'll tell you something good. If I don't die, then your world will disappear. So... don't come chasing me." Alright, so even the at the time level-headed Justin couldn't help but choke on a bit of spittle at that. What kind of sick game were these shadows playing? It was like saw on an astronomically large scale and with a lot less blood. And yet somehow, it still felt as painful as jabbing a rusty saw into one's eyeball.

"Disappear!?"

"Dammit Marie!" Justin shouted with great fury, having finally lost his composure, though whether he was angry at Marie for all of this or just the entire predicament he had just been thrust into. Why was it he had to keep making decisions like this? He didn't want to play judge, jury and executioner. He didn't want to play god. Yet it seemed that position of power always fell upon his shoulders, like a sacred duty. He didn't want it though. He didn't want it. "We said we're here to save you, and we're going to do it dammit! We just need to figure out a way." Justin muttered a bit. He needed to know the connection between her and their world disappearing; and then he needed to sever that link and that link only. Problem solved, and they could all live happily ever after. Marie's eyes fell downward with pain for a brief moment.

"Thank you. But, it won't do you any good. I'm tired. I... I just want to end it all." She sighed with pain, falling back down on the stairs beneath her. It was clear the guilt was eating away at her in ways they could never understand. She really was exhausted from all of this. She just wanted to lie down and die. It made Justin wonder if anyone actually was at risk of disappearing or if Marie was just trying to justify slumbering for the last time. For giving up. Justin turned to the others, holding out a hand to tell them to stay back before slowly approaching Marie, taking a seat beside her on the stairs. She didn't fight back or tell him to back off again. I think she was just so sick of fighting.

"You don't have to be the bad guy you know." Justin explained. It seemed she was just dead set convinced that no matter what, she was a harbinger of death and destruction to the humans after what she had done. If that didn't define her as a bad guy for the rest of her days, she wasn't sure what would. She shook her head with denial.

"That's not true... I'm not like you. I don't have freedom. Our role was more than to simply find out the wishes of man. Our true role... is to control the fog and bring that wish to fruition. Don't you think it's strange that the fog never went away? That it lasted for months? The Sagiri created the fog, and I absorbed it. The fog that changes people to Shadows. When Ameno-sagiri was defeated, the fog covering

your town was no longer needed. Then I heard a voice... and all the fog flowed into me. The fog isn't gone. Even now, it's raging inside me... When my mind is completely overpowered by the fog, I will disappear, taking the fog and the Hollow Forrest with me. I am 'a being destined for nonexistence.' That's the memory that came back to me... The world will be saved."

"That doesn't sound like a bad guy to me." Justin countered. A sad expression on his face. Marie simply shook her head.

"No... it doesn't. But it does mean I have a job to do." It was quiet as the words left her lips... She was unfortunately very correct in many ways. If she was destined to be just one giant walking bomb destined to take the world down with her, then, well... This was how it had to be. Justin was sure there had to be alternatives, there just had to be... but they didn't exactly have much time left to find those alternatives. It could very well be this was how it ended. Justin raised his eyes from the steps beneath him to stare at Marie.

"...Are you sure this is what you want to do?"

"Dammit Justin, don't reinforce-"

"Shut up!" Justin immediately snapped at Yu, putting him in his place within a split second. "This isn't your life. You don't get to make her decisions for her." Justin countered with annoyance. It was hard to let a friend die after all, but at the end of the day, it was her or them... She made her choice, and I'm pretty sure as reluctant as the rest of the group was to just stand by and let her do this... they had to. It was for the better good. He glared at Yu for a moment longer before turning his ire back over to Marie. "You realize that you don't have to do this. We all have something inside of us trying to break loose. Hell, my inner demon comes out at least once a week these days." Justin chuckled slightly as he tapped the side of his skull. No doubt Marie knew what he was talking about... But it wasn't quite the same. A shadow was nothing like the fog in her heart. "You can fight this you know."

"No... I can't." Justin sighed a bit with disappointment before raising his eyes back to the Investigation Team. There was a combination of both horror and great sadness in their eyes as they watched Marie not only try to off herself, but have Justin practically back her up on the matter. But at the end of the day, he wanted her to stay just as much as anyone else... He was just giving her the choice in the matter of what she wanted to do. And for the first time in her life... she was free.

"Well then, I guess this is it..." Justin sighed with pain, biting his bottom lip for a moment. "Guys? Just head on down without me. There's one last thing I need to do."

"Huh? Now wait a sec-

“Just do it!” Justin shouted with fury as Yosuke tried to object. They couldn’t morally leave her behind like this, and yet they were suddenly finding themselves in a position where they had to. They had no alternative and they had no time... And they had Justin siding against them. He wasn’t exactly the end all go to guy of course, but it made it pretty clear that as long as Justin supported her decision, she wasn’t going to budge. It was a long while before Yosuke took the first step back, hating to admit that Justin might be right. This wasn’t their decision. They didn’t decide who lived and died; and while they’d love to be saviors to everyone, they couldn’t save all the people all the time... And this time, they could save one person and kill a billion, or save a billion and kill one. It didn’t take a mathematician to see how this needed to end. The others slowly followed, tears in some eyes as they marched away in defeat. And that left Justin and Marie sitting there on the steps alone. “So this is it huh? You know... You still have time. We could go back for a day or two. Enjoy the time you have left, you know?”

“I’ve already made enough memories of my own... fun... happy... memories... “ Marie stuttered abit, tears clogging her throat as she tried to convict herself to the path she had chosen.

“Sounds like you don’t want to die.”

“Of course I don’t!”

“Then don’t.”

“It’s not that easy!”

“But it IS Marie.” Justin countered, putting his hand on her shoulder in a reassuring fashion. “Stubborn people don’t go down without a fight, and you... well you’re as stubborn as they get. All you need to do is fight it. You have the willpower and you have the strength... you just lack the motivation.”

“What would YOU know!” Marie countered with great anger. He couldn’t feel the fog stirring around inside, trying to break out and kill fucking everything. And yet, that was what he lived with everyday; a cold, heartless evil living inside him trying to break free. If he gave up at anytime, his shadow could easily take-over. But as long as he worked at suppressing him, he could never prevail. At most he could get inches at a time. Justin shook his head pressing his fingers up towards his head and flicking some hair out of his eyes, revealing his pupiless iris.

“We’re a lot more alike than you think we are Marie. Right down to the eye.” He chuckled a bit. Marie was a little caught off guard in that she had never noticed his disfigured eye before. Of course, that didn’t put him in a position where he had the entire human race resting on his shoulders; on whether he lived or died. But it did mean he could relate to some extent. “I’ve lived through some pretty fucked up shit Marie; things I don’t think even you could imagine. But I’m still standing... I’m still

standing.” Justin muttered to himself over and over again. That’s right... He was still standing. All this time, he lived on a memory of everything that happened to him in the past that caused him nothing but suffering and pain. His father, Adachi, all of it. And he had tried to suppress it. But... He was still standing. It was painful, but he was still standing. It was torment, but he was still standing. It was more torture than any human being should have to bear, but he was still standing. He made it. The pain was gone leaving nothing but scars. Justin chuckled a bit, unrolling his gauss bandages before throwing them off to the side, revealing his injuries to Marie. “The mistakes of the past... they’re just cuts and bruises. Sometimes they heal... sometimes they don’t. But they can’t hurt you anymore unless you let them.”

“...This isn’t just a matter of mind over matter-“

“It’s always a matter of mind over matter. If I didn’t have hope I swear to god I would have slit my wrists years ago. It is because I fought that I’m still alive today, Marie... You can fight it too, you just have to believe it.” Justin explained. He was convinced that whatever it was she had inside of her, she could contain it.

“I don’t think I can.” She shivered a bit, the thought of death starting to grip her like a vice. She wanted to fight it, but she knew what had to be done. And believing something was or wasn’t true didn’t change the actuality. She couldn’t change the fact that she was a walking time bomb. At most she could extend the fuse a little at a time. Justin sighed nodding his head.

“...Then you’ve already lost.” She didn’t have hope. She didn’t have the weapons she needed to stake the ultimate battle: the one within himself. It was quiet for a moment after that, silence between the two as they contemplated on the matter. Marie on how she could fight it, Justin on how he could give her the tools to do it. Alas... he had nothing. “Well I guess this is it then. You’ve... been a great friend Marie.” Justin complimented reaching out to grab the guitar Marie had set down a moment earlier. She was confused at first, if not somewhat irritated. That was still hers, even if she was going to die. “There was... still one more lesson I needed to teach you... Consider it a farewell gift.” He explained nimbly pressing his fingers against the guitar strings as he showcased a simple, but sorrowful riff.

“...A farewell gift.” She smiled after a moment. If there was anyway she was going to go out... perhaps this was the way she wanted to go. She watched Justin for a moment, observing the guitar with great intensity, listening to the hollow notes ringing in her ears and reaching down to her gut. She didn’t even move to take the guitar away from Justin. Perhaps because this song was dedicated just as much to himself as it was her... he didn’t want to let go of the strings vibrating in his hand. The riff repeated for a while before Justin began to croak, tears filling his throat as he let the music speak to his very soul. He had heard the song so many times before... but there was a difference between playing a song and feeling a song.

I hurt myself today,

To see if I still feel.

I focus on the pain,

The only thing that's real.

The needle tears a hole,

The old familiar sting.

Try to kill it all away,

But I remember everything.

His voice was raspy, and though there was a musical tone to his words, it seemed as though Justin was simply speaking from his heart right now. From the hurt he had accumulated in his chest for so many a years. And Marie could feel that pain. And she could feel her own. And yet despite her heart tingling with the tears of blood filling up in her chest, she couldn't help but find some relief in all of this. Like a burden being lifted from her, draining out into an abyss somewhere she did not know. And for just a moment, the two were trapped in a moment of pure and total pain, yet bliss in the emotions being dismissed from their organs.

What have I become?

My sweetest friend.

Everyone I know,

Goes away in the end.

And you could have it all,

My empire of dirt.

I will let you down,

I will make you hurt.

And so the two sat there as Justin plucked away at the strings, letting the haunting melody that rang all too true to both of them fill their very being. And for a moment, it seemed like their problems were non-existent. It was a good final memory to die to. Justin bit his bottom lip for a moment, tears welling up in his eyes as he passed one last glance to the girl sitting beside him; the one who would never again sit next to him as they recited music. The one who he couldn't save, as much as he tried. *I will let you down... I will make you hurt...*

I wear this crown of thorns,

Upon my liar's chair.

Full of broken thoughts,

I cannot repair.

Beneath the stains of time,

The feelings disappear.

You are someone else.

I am still right here.

And so the song rang through the night, a haunting memory of what Justin feared. Being unable to save someone he held dear to him. It was a song that carried with it a whole new definition of hurt; for as long as he heard that song, it would remind him of the moment those two shared there on the stairs, waiting for death to come and liberate them both. One from a life they had grown weary of, one of an imminent danger that risked killing them all. He couldn't sleep as he laid there on the bed his mind replaying those minutes over and over again. As the sound of guitar strings was carried on the night air, pain rising into the sky just the way it did in his heart. He slowly pushed himself up from the bed, heart too heavy for him to sleep before making his way to the window, opening it up to let the wind blow in his face, to cool down his racing mind. And of course to absorb the sound of the pluck of guitar strings in the midnight sky.

His eyes fell down onto the grounds just outside his house. And if he squinted just enough, he could make out the distinctive figure of a black haired girl with her purple hat, a guitar in her hands as she played along to the wailing of the wolves in the night. He smiled, his heart strings being played like the instrument in her hands. To this day, he wasn't sure if it was just an aspiration of guilt for not being able to do more or if she had escaped from her role as a martyr there in the Hollow Forest. He never did see her again, not outside his window, not at Junes, not on his couch with that old guitar of hers. It was like she vanished without a trace. And he would be convinced she had, but the mere fact that he remembered her filled him with a sense of hope. Sometimes to this very day he still remembered the figure in the distance strumming her guitar, carefree in the distance, whispering to him reassurance that everything had turned out for the better, somehow, somewhere. And he smiled.

If I could start again,

A million miles away.

I would keep myself.

I would find a way.

MUSIC

I Appear Missing - Queens of the Stone Age

Hurt - Johnny Cash